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The Place in letters of Henry Norman Hudson

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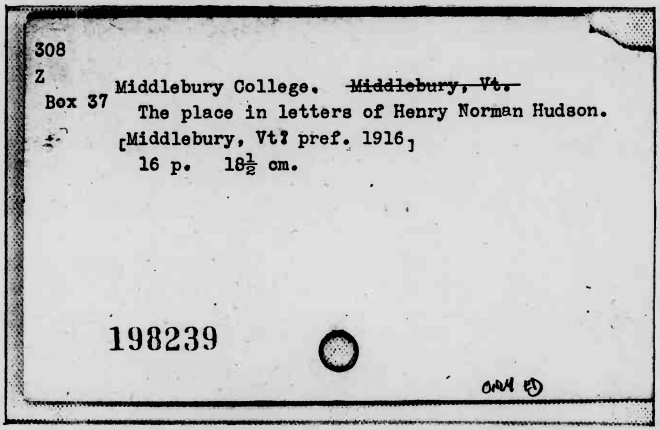

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THE PLACE IN LETTERS OF
HENRY NORMAN HUDSON

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THIS pamphlet was issued by Middlebury College in the spring of 1915, in connection with a movement to endow in that institution a Henry Norman Hudson Chair of English Literature. It was prepared primarily for the alumni and immediate friends of the college, but it is reissued now in order that a larger public, in this tercentenary of Shakespeare's death, may know of Mr. Hudson's eminent service in the Shakespearean field and of the effort that is being made to give that service a worthy academic recognition.

Middlebury College
February, 1916

THE PLACE IN LETTERS OF HENRY NORMAN HUDSON

IT IS the purpose of this pamphlet to set forth briefly the life and work of Henry Norman Hudson. In the record of the Class of 1840 in the General Catalogue of Middlebury College, the following facts are given:

"HENRY NORMAN HUDSON. Born in Cornwall, Vt., "Jan. 28, 1814. After graduation he taught and "lectured in the West. He delivered his first lec- "tures on Shakespeare in Boston, 1844. Ordained, "1849. His first edition of Shakespeare's plays "appeared 1851. Editor, *Churchman*, 1852–1855; "*Church Monthly*, 1855–1857; Boston *Gazette*, "1857. Rector, Litchfield, Conn., 1858–1860. For "three years during the Civil War he was chaplain "of a New York regiment. After 1865 he lived in "Cambridge, Mass., and devoted himself chiefly "to Shakespearean literature. He published many "works — the Harvard edition of Shakespeare being "his last of any prominence. Married Emily Sarah "Bright, Dec. 18, 1852. Children: Henry B.;

" William C. Phi Beta Kappa. A.B.; A.M., Trin-
" ity, 1850; LL.D., Middlebury, 1881. Died in
" Cambridge, Mass., Jan. 16, 1886."

In expanding certain of these details, the writer has availed himself of the memorial address delivered before the Alumni of Middlebury College, June 29, 1886, by J. E. Rankin, D.D., of the Class of 1848, and printed in the issues of *The Undergraduate* for October and November of that year. By the kind permission of the publishers, Messrs. Ginn and Company, free use has also been made of the preface, introduction, and notes of Dr. Andrew J. George's " Essays on English Studies by Henry N. Hudson, LL.D."

The story of Henry Hudson's early life, and of the training that brought him to graduation in his twenty-seventh year, while by no means unusual, is of great interest. During boyhood on a farm, his only educational opportunities were those afforded by a district school. At eighteen years of age he became apprenticed to a coach-maker, with whom he remained three years and in whose family he lived. It was this master who recognized the intelligence and ambition of the youth, and suggested that he prepare for college. He secured this preparation

himself, with no assistance other than occasional advice from the local minister, and in 1836 he entered Middlebury, where a brother, who did not graduate, was already a student.

His college years were quiet, studious ones, for he was older than most of his classmates, and of a diffident, retiring nature. But those who came to know him found that he had a strength of conviction and a skill in the presentation of his thoughts that marked him, in their judgment, as a man of unusual promise. The story of the shoes carried in his hand, for economy's sake, as he walked back and forth between the college and his home, has held its own among the Middlebury traditions. More to the present purpose, as showing that even when an undergraduate a love of Shakespeare had become in him a master passion, is an incident related by Rev. Luther H. Sheldon, of the Class of 1839: " At one time when Hudson seemed even more than usually earnest and happy in his comments, I remarked to him, 'Hudson, you will some day write a book on Shakespeare; I will give you a title, — The Beauties of the World's Greatest Poet.' He replied, 'Oh, no; I read and study this author only because of the genuine pleasure it affords me, and the kind of rest it gives me from the fatigue and routine of my college application.' "

Here, as Dr. George remarks, was the fundamental principle of Hudson's great work as an æsthetic critic, and of all his teaching of the English classics.

The four years that followed his graduation were spent in teaching in Kentucky and Alabama, and in lecturing upon Shakespeare in the principal southern cities. These lectures are said to have revealed a wealth of ideas, originality of interpretation, ripeness of thought, and vigor and mastery of language, and to have met with great success. Their fame traveled as far as New England, whither their author came in 1844 and began in Boston and vicinity the work that made him increasingly, and to the end of life, a man of note. From the very first the charm of his personality and the unconventional freshness of his interpretative work combined to win him friends. George Ticknor, Theodore Parker, Richard H. Dana, and Ralph Waldo Emerson were enthusiastic admirers of the new critic. Those were the palmy days of the lyceum, and Hudson soon became as popular as Emerson himself in the lecture courses of the great cities. Horace Howard Furness has testified to a vivid remembrance of the enthusiasm aroused by the early Hudson lectures in Philadelphia, and of the unexampled crowds that attended them. So popular, too, were these lectures when they were

published in 1848, with a dedication to Richard H. Dana, that a second edition was called for within a year. One secret of their success, perhaps, — the fact that the heart of the author was in his work, — is revealed in an estimate of them from the pen of Doctor Bartol, in the *North American Review*: "Never was a heartier, more absorbing admiration shown than Mr. Hudson's for his subject. After long-continued meditation and much re-writing, these lectures are now presented to us like 'beaten oil,' pure and rich."

From this edition of the lectures to an edition of Shakespeare's plays the step was logical and easy, and in 1851 such an edition, in eleven volumes, appeared. Its publication was opportune. The plates of the pioneer American edition of Shakespeare, brought out by Mr. Gulian C. Verplanck in 1847, had been destroyed by fire, and Mr. Hudson's edition in consequence had practical control of the market. It did not need, though, the adventitious assistance given it by the disaster to the Verplanck plates; the features that had won a merited popularity for the lectures were amply able to insure to the new venture an equal reputation and success.

The crowning work of Henry Hudson's literary life is doubtless "Shakespeare's Life, Art, and Characters," published in two volumes in 1872 — the

greatest work, it has been said, in the field of the æsthetic criticism of Shakespeare yet produced in this country, and the equal of the best by English and German scholars. The Harvard Shakespeare, in twenty volumes, followed in 1880, and has held an honorable place among the rapidly multiplying editions. In the years that have passed, however, since its appearance, the textual handling of Shakespeare has undergone a change; in that portion of the field neither the work of Hudson nor that of any of his contemporaries is abreast of present-day tendency. For the old-time readiness to tamper with the text has been substituted a respect for the integrity of the originals amounting almost to reverence. Not a few brilliant emendations, from the days of Pope and Theobald onward, must in justice be placed to the credit of that blithe editorial audacity; but they always belonged in the footnotes, and in the footnotes they must be content hereafter to appear. While, then, it would be manifestly unfair to condemn Hudson, who himself grew increasingly conservative, for a textual tampering which was simply the time-honored practice and to which his editorial predecessors and contemporaries were equally prone, it is a matter for congratulation that a new edition — an edition whose excellence makes one wish that its

volumes might be issued more rapidly — is squaring its text to the better tendency while preserving untouched the features that gave to the work of Hudson its perennial importance.

Those features were frankly æsthetic; the contention of the author was that in diffusing and promoting Shakespeare study — his own supreme ambition — the æsthetic criticism of Coleridge, Schlegel, Lamb, and Hazlitt had probably done more than all the verbal criticism of the world put together. It is important, therefore, to learn the judgment of scholars as to the degree of his success. That judgment is exceptionally favorable. When the Harvard Shakespeare was issued, it elicited unstinted praise from eminent Shakespeareans on both sides of the water. Mr. Frederick J. Furnivall, in his introduction to the Leopold Shakespeare, gave as the three best guides for students, Gervinus of Heidelberg, Dowden of Dublin, and Hudson of Boston; Professor Dowden placed the edition beside the best work of English Shakespeare students; and Doctor Furness, in ordering sets of it to be sent to the English Shakespeare Memorial Library and the library of the German Shakespeare Society, wrote: "I scarcely know how I can better show my high appreciation of this noble edition than by placing it where English and German

scholars can have free access to it and learn from it the wealth of love and learning which in this country is dedicated to Shakespeare." The estimate of Dr. William J. Rolfe, an authority in the same field of labor, is that Hudson's are the best works of æsthetic criticism in this country, ranking with the great works of their class in English and German literature. Nor was the praise from academic students alone; Edwin Booth and Sir Henry Irving testified independently, and to the same effect, that the studies of Hudson had proved for them more helpful than those of any other commentator — a convincing evidence of their practical quality.

The significance of these judgments has been well set forth by Doctor Rankin: "Let us pause a moment to take in what this means. This Cornwall boy, in early life apprenticed to a coach-maker, attracted to the halls of Middlebury College, whose daily morning bell was to him like a trumpet call, a literary reveille — entering here at twenty-two, with an insatiable appetite for books; in addition to routine work, giving himself to the study of such works as Butler's Analogy, Plutarch's Lives, and the book next to the Bible the great English classic, the Works of Shakespeare — does such masterly work, as the interpreter of the great dramatist, that he is admitted

into the society of the great universal man, the many-sided Goethe; the dreamy-thoughted, philosophical Coleridge; the acute and epigrammatic Hazlitt. Gleaning in the same field where they and others have been before him, he so appropriates and digests their thoughts, he so originates views of his own, that when he dies at seventy-two, he leaves a compendium of interpretations and criticisms, new and old, second, probably, to none in completeness and suggestiveness, in delicacy and discrimination, in solidity and value; thus linking himself and his life to that which can never die."

Mr. Hudson was preëminently an educator. Whether as teacher, lecturer, clergyman, or writer of books, it was his ambition and his privilege to kindle in others his own enthusiasm for noble literature, and to impart to them some measure of his own perception of its beauty and its power. In the words of a master at St. Paul's School, Concord, New Hampshire, where Mr. Hudson was for years a teacher: "He was poet, critic, philosopher, and preacher all in one, and his wisdom was enforced by the loving example of his own genuine goodness." No words of others, however, will reveal so fully as do his own utterances his desire to quicken a love for Shakespeare in the minds and hearts of those he

taught, and to bring them into vital relation with the poet's revelation of life. The following vigorous extracts from his " English in the Schools " are characteristic; they show the method of his teaching, and his profound belief in the virtue of the writings that endure:

" Unquestionably the right way in this matter is, to start the young with such authors as have been tested and approved by a large collective judgment. For it is not what pleases at first, but what pleases permanently, that the human mind cares to keep alive. What has thus withstood the wear of time carries solid proof of having strength and virtue in it. True, there may be good books written in our day; I think there are: but there needs a longer trial than one generation to certify us of the fact, so as to warrant us in adopting an author for standard use. And that a new book seems to us good, may be in virtue of some superficial prepossession which a larger trial will utterly explode. We need better assurance than that.

" It is indeed sometimes urged that, if the young be thus trained up with old authors, they will be in danger of falling behind the age. But it is not so. The surest way of coming at such a result is by preëngaging them with the literary freaks and fashions and

popularities of the day. To hold them aloof from such flitting popularities, to steep their minds in the efficacy of such books as have always been, and are likely to be, above the fashion of the day, — this is the true course for setting them *in advance* of the time; and, unless they be set in advance of it, they will certainly fail to keep abreast with it. For the wisdom that has had the long and strong approval of the past is most likely to be the wisdom of the future; and the way to keep pace with the age is by dwelling with its wisdom, not with its folly. And to knit your pupils up close with old standards is the best thing you can do for them, both mentally and morally.

" And I confess I like to see the young growing enthusiastic over the treasured wisdom and eloquence of their forefathers. To be sure, the atmosphere of the past now stands impeached as being a very dull and sleepy atmosphere: nevertheless I rather like it, and think I have often found much health and comfort in breathing it. Some old writer tells us that ' no man having drunk old wine straightway desireth the new; for he saith the old is better.' I am much of the same opinion. In short, old wine, old books, old friends, old songs, ' the precious music of the heart,' are the wine, the books, the friends, the songs for me!

"And one of our greatest needs at this very time is more of inspiration from the past. Living too much in the present is not good either for the mind or for the heart: its tendency is to steep the soul in the transient popularities of the hour, and to vulgarize the whole man. Not that the present age is worse than former ages; it may even be better as a whole: but what is bad or worthless in an age generally dies with the age, so that only the great and good of the past touches us; while of the present we are most touched by that which is little and mean. The shriekings and jabberings of an age's folly almost always drown, for the time being, the eloquence of its wisdom; but the eloquence lives and speaks after the jabberings have gone silent, God's air refusing to propagate them. So let our youth now and then breathe and listen an hour or two in the old intellectual fatherland, where all the foul noises have long since died away, leaving the pure music to sound up full and clear."

It is the hope of the compiler of this pamphlet that upon the Hudson foundation in the years to come, besides whatever of technical training the English curriculum may demand, one course at least may be given, conceived in the Hudson spirit and possessed of some measure of his living power, his warm

human sympathy, his clear moral purpose, and his noble conception of true literary workmanship.

Next to Shakespeare, the authors that Mr. Hudson most delighted to expound were Wordsworth, Burke, and Webster. His admiration for Webster was so unbounded, and the quality of all his utterances regarding Webster had been so notable, that his classmate, Hon. Edward J. Phelps, then president of the Webster Historical Society, turned to him as the man best fitted for biographer. In February, 1882, Mr. Phelps wrote: "Do not forget that I have appointed you to write that grand life, and shall help you to all constitutional and legal material I know of." That the task would have been worthily performed, none can doubt who have read the address delivered by Mr. Hudson on the centennial of Webster's birth. The materials for the biography had been gathered and were waiting only to be fused into form, when death came unexpectedly, following a surgical operation, soon after his last public appearance in a lecture on "Cymbeline" at Wellesley College. Best, perhaps, of the many tributes evoked was that written from the legation of the United States at London by his eminent and lifelong friend, the Ambassador to the Court of St. James: "Student, scholar, gentleman, Christian, happy in

his family, his friendships, his distinguished reputation, his well-earned success: not many reach the limit of threescore and ten with so much to be thankful for, so little to deplore." Happy, too, the college that can count within a single class the praiser and the praised!

"Our Alma Mater," said Doctor Rankin in his memorial address, "has graduated many honored sons. Some of them have worn the judge's ermine; some have walked in the high places of the earth; have stood before kings. They have worn the poet's singing robes. The forum has echoed to their eloquence; the pulpit and the bar. They have borne her name and her imprint into the distant parts of the earth; their feet beautiful upon the mountains, as they have gone the heralds of the Prince of Peace. But when one considers the kind of work he did, the quality of it, and the classes for which it has been done, it is doubtful whether any of her most honored sons have ever accomplished for her what will be longer remembered, or what will rest more as an earthly benediction on humanity, than Henry Norman Hudson."

Middlebury College
March, 1915

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